

# Clausewitz's Advice to the New US President

JAMES J. MONTANO and DENNIS H. LONG

*During our study of Carl von Clausewitz's On War in the context of America's quest for a unified grand strategy, we asked ourselves the following question: "If Clausewitz were alive today, what advice would he give to the US President?" What follows is our imagined construction of such advice, based upon our extrapolations from On War. Many modern readers may find Clausewitz's "advice" to be strong medicine indeed, but his unapologetic realpolitik serves to dramatize the dimensions of a serious national security problem for which no satisfactory solution has as yet been found.—The Authors*

20 January 1989  
The President of the United States  
The White House  
Washington

Dear Mr. President:

Let me begin by congratulating you on the occasion of your inauguration. I suspect you are beginning to feel the full weight of the duty and responsibility of your high office. You certainly face a term filled with challenges unprecedented in human history.

It is the fearsomeness of these challenges which impels me to transmit to you this letter of advice on the matter of national security strategy. You might be a bit skeptical of any advice from a classical soldier who never lived for even one day in a democracy, and who went to his final reward over a century and a half ago. I cannot blame you. Nevertheless, I believe I have something to offer. I have had a great deal of time on my hands to study the past

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four decades of American experience on the diplomatic and military stage. Although the "experts" (government officials, military professionals, academics, and congressmen) of your time have written prolifically on the subject, I hope you will appreciate the objective views of one from a less sophisticated time.

I have developed a great respect and admiration for your country, and I am very anxious just now for its future well-being. I fear your political and governmental system has evolved in an unbalanced manner, leaving you vulnerable to your enemies. I feel a special obligation to be of assistance since your enemies have exploited my book *On War* as one basis for their strategic methods.<sup>1</sup> Many of my ideas from that volume can be of aid to you also, but I fear the unedited state in which I left the manuscript makes these ideas somewhat inaccessible. Also, written as they were for a much simpler era, these ideas may appear to lack relevance to your much more complex world. And yet, if you would suffer to read my entire offering, I believe you would agree that those musty old pages hold some lessons which, *when properly updated*, should be critically important to the safety and longevity of the nation you now lead and the nations which look to yours for leadership. You are a busy man, however, and thus unlikely to find the time even to read my ancient tome, much less transpose it into terms applicable to today. What I propose therefore is to provide a Clausewitzian analysis of the American security situation today, based upon a version of *On War* adapted to modern needs.

There can be no doubt that your national strategic system is in disarray. From Vietnam to the Iran-Contra scandal, the picture of America has certainly not been one of a nation which identifies its interests and then effectively employs its resources in a resolute and coordinated manner to achieve them. To the contrary, the strategic image of the United States has been one of a declining power, becoming more and more unreliable and vacillating.

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An objective observer of the last four decades of American participation in the international arena finds more grounds for pessimism than for optimism. There has seldom been a more powerful nation with such a poorly demonstrated ability to use its power wisely. To most of the world, your war in Vietnam signaled not only the beginning of a decline in national power but a growing inability to define national purpose and to reach a durable consensus on how to achieve it. Little has transpired in the years since to alter that impression. The constant struggle between every president and every congress over "war powers" and the frequent reversals of policy, as in the case of support for the rebels in Nicaragua, solidify your unfortunate reputation.

Indeed, President Reagan's Blue Ribbon Panel on Defense Management, chaired by David Packard, reached some similarly distressing conclusions:

There is no rational system whereby the Executive Branch and the Congress reach coherent and enduring agreement on national military strategy, the forces to carry it out, and the funding that should be provided in light of the overall economy and competing claims on national resources.<sup>2</sup>

Members of your congress recognize the problem, though they are not yet sure of a solution. Representative Ike Skelton has written:

Over the past few years, I have received correspondence from a number of people who have been intimately involved with national security matters. They sincerely believe that a failure of national leadership, both political and military, has occurred with respect to the formulation of national strategy.<sup>3</sup>

And Senator Sam Nunn, who has held extensive and informed hearings on the national strategy formulation process, has said: "At this stage, I have serious questions about the clarity, coherence, and consistency of our current strategy. . . . I have been raising these questions for several years and have not gotten any answers."<sup>4</sup>

America's recent introduction of a naval task force in the Persian Gulf in 1988 fits the same mold. Not only did the executive and legislature continue open conflict over terms of reference, but even within the executive itself then-Secretary of the Navy James Webb publicly expressed confusion over the purpose and goals of the effort.<sup>5</sup>

The "tradition" of internal conflict within the executive branch of your government is an especially disturbing trend of long standing. I find within most administrations a normal routine of divided and disputed control over strategic decisionmaking and operations among the State Department, the White House staff, the National Security Council staff, and the Defense Department. Three secretaries of state have resigned as a result of such struggles: William Rogers in 1973, Cyrus Vance in 1980, and Alexander Haig in

1982.<sup>6</sup> Further, conflict between the secretaries of defense and state has been the rule for most of the last 40 years.<sup>7</sup>

There are those in your country who see this disorganized approach to national security strategy as some sort of democratic virtue, or at worst a price which must be paid for the sake of having free institutions. While I admit to being inexperienced in the exercise of democracy, I do hope to convince you that the process must and can be improved without damaging the free nature of American government. Indeed, it is highly likely that those same free institutions, without improvement in the planning and execution of national security strategy, will have difficulty surviving for long into the next century.

A nation guides its actions by first identifying its national interests, and from these deriving appropriate objectives—those compelling needs which seem worth the use of power to achieve. Once these interests are determined, as well as the objectives which if achieved will protect these interests, then a concept is formulated to use the instruments of national power to achieve these interest-driven objectives. These facts of international life are elementary.

The theoretical ideas necessary for understanding and curing the ills of your strategic process are contained in my book, *On War*. However, each of these ideas requires some revision to account for the passage of a century and a half. I must begin by revising my view of the very nature of war itself. Twentieth-century war is no longer limited to the clash of armed forces on the battlefield. Modern nations now exert their power in a wide variety of ways to include diplomacy, economic action, and propaganda, as well as threatening the use of force. These instruments of national power should not be employed in isolation, of course, but must rather be purposefully integrated so that the additive effect and artful timing of their impact maximize their force and likelihood of success. While I was among the first to recognize the linkage of military force to diplomacy, I admit that I did not grasp the critical importance that these other elements of national power were to assume.

War in your day must be thought of as a constant and continuous competition between you and your enemies. This modern warfare employs a wide variety of instruments and methods in which the stakes are preservation of national interests, the most important of which is your national survival. I think that your country has really been at war in this broader sense through all the years since World War II. It is a large part of your problem that very few of your citizens see it that way. In losing sight of this de facto war, marked as it has been by long periods of so-called peace, citizens forget the need to invoke the full spectrum of national power, including particularly its non-military dimensions. Indeed, your predecessor was moved to write in January of 1988, "Unfortunately, America's national power is sometimes thought of only in coercive or military terms."<sup>8</sup>

The first key to coherent national security strategy, then, is to think of war as a long-term, perhaps never-ending competition with nations whose interests conflict with yours. This competition is a process demanding the integrated employment of armed force, economic power, propaganda, diplomacy, nation-building, and every other source of national power to gain advantage.

But concepts will never in themselves alter the actions of men and nations. To effect change, it is necessary to examine the environment and the nature of the domestic players who actually devise and execute the nation's strategy. In my day, I based this examination of war as a total phenomenon on a model which I called the "paradoxical trinity"—(1) the violent passions which animate war, associated with the *people*; (2) the exercise of courage and talent on the battlefield within the bounds of chance and probability, associated with the *commander and his army*; and (3) the subordination of war to political aims, associated with the *government*.<sup>9</sup> The roles of each of the actors in the trinity changed significantly during my lifetime, and those roles continue to develop in your own time.

Immediately prior to my service as a Prussian officer, warfare was almost entirely within the purview of the king and his professional army. The people saw themselves as removed from the fortunes of the "King's wars." It was the king who determined the national interests and the national security strategy; it was the army which executed it.<sup>10</sup> The French Revolution and the Wars of Napoleon fundamentally changed this arrangement by giving rise to the "nation in arms." In addition to removing most of the existing limitations on the scope and ferocity of war, the mass participation of the people marked the beginning of the gradual growth of influence by the people themselves in the planning and conduct of war.<sup>11</sup>

This influence of the people over the other two actors of the trinity has continued to increase, and it is in this area that your most serious problems begin. Today's paralysis in strategy stems from unprecedented growth in the power of the American people over the day-to-day functioning of their government. Let me hasten to declare that I do not consider this to be a bad thing in and of itself. I have become an admirer of democracy. However, as I will argue later, this growth in power has not been accompanied by necessary growth in leadership and wisdom.

The increase in the immediate power of the electorate has resulted from several factors. First, the electronic media inform people more rapidly and in greater detail than ever before of what their government is doing and is *intending to do*. Second, the electorate is astonishingly more capable of immediately registering its approval or disapproval of actual or contemplated actions by its elected leaders. This is due in some part to the proliferation of the media, including the use of the telephone to register reaction with government officials; but the bulk of the expanded influence seems to be due to the

massive growth and popularity of opinion polls. These two developments produce a populace which is aware of government action in great detail and able to express its desires before decisions can be made. I believe your elected officials spend less time considering what is right and best for the nation than they spend asking their constituents what they wish to have done.

In theory, this situation need not pose a problem, provided the electorate wields its power in a manner guided by the long-term interests of the nation. The overwhelming evidence seems to indicate, however, that national interest is rarely a factor in the formation of public opinion. Instead, public opinion on national issues is often based on short-term, personal, and local self-interest.

I do not believe this state of affairs is to be blamed on the people, but rather on another actor of the trinity—the government. The role of government faced with a highly informed and active populace should be to lead and not merely to follow. This leadership should begin with the identification and formulation of national interests. It must be more than a case of mere articulation. It must be a process of discussion and debate and consensus-building. Bypassing this step would be a great mistake, since popular support for any unpleasant but necessary future action must be derived from commitment to a commonly supported interest. Indeed, as you learned from observing Vietnam, Mr. President, even identifying national interests is not enough. The nation must also decide how much it is willing to sacrifice in protecting them. The American people will not follow you in sacrificing to achieve a goal unless they are convinced that it is *indeed vital* and is *worth the cost*.

The role of Congress in consensus-building is key. However, my observation is that congressmen, as well as the electorate, are traditionally focused on single issues, usually domestic issues. This political environment forces you to focus on the same areas. You, Sir, have the critical roles of leadership and education in shifting this focus to critical matters of national security strategy. You will certainly need help in integrating and coordinating your strategic vision for your countrymen.

The inability of the American people and government to meet this challenge plays into the hands of your enemies. The Soviets cannot help observing that the United States lacks a working consensus on where its interests lie, and what it is willing to sacrifice in defending them. They must particularly appreciate that decisions are often made in ignorance of long-term implications. I must say that they have used these weaknesses against you masterfully. They have conducted their campaigns of territorial and ideological expansion slowly and patiently. As a result, the American people have seldom felt sufficiently threatened at any single moment to resist. It is true that the people became roused in Korea, the Cuban missile crisis, and Vietnam; but in every case the passage of time restored the American preference for avoiding immediate unpleasantness and for disregarding long-term interests. Soviet pressure has

skillfully avoided any appearance of directly threatening the American people. In *On War*, I recognized that the will of the people may serve to limit the sacrifices that will be made to achieve any political aim. Your enemies have masterfully determined the limits of American will and are patiently conducting their campaign against you within those boundaries.

Unfortunately, your problems are not limited to the people and the government, important as these actors are in the paradoxical trinity. Of course, with my new broader view of war in the 20th century, the remaining actor—the army—needs to be broadened in scope as well. What I in the olden days referred to as the “army” has become “defense executors” in your day. Executors include every person and agency involved in planning for and actually executing the use of national power, and they range beyond the formal defense establishment itself. For example, the list would include the entire Department of Defense, Department of State, National Security Council, Central Intelligence Agency, and US Information Agency, as well as portions of the Departments of Treasury, Justice, Commerce, and Agriculture.

Even if this large group of executors were well organized and coordinated, they would have a very difficult time executing the ill-defined and mercurial strategy produced by the people and the government. But unfortunately, they are not well organized or coordinated. In fact, the organization of the executive branch is better suited to the 17th-century view of strategy implementation than today’s. Our broader view of war today calls for all the instruments of power to be used in concert to support and complement each other in achieving national goals. Instead, your executor agencies have no common authority except yourself, and no one president, however energetic or dedicated, could ever hope to orchestrate the actions of today’s gargantuan bureaucracy and still find time to lead the country.

The need to unify the planning and execution efforts of the executor agencies has been recognized for many years, but the need has never been met. The National Security Council, particularly its permanent staff, was intended to meet such a requirement. However, it has had a mixed record at best, and has been effective only under strong National Security Advisors like Dr. Henry Kissinger, who enhanced unity of effort by assuming some of the authority of cabinet members.<sup>12</sup> More characteristic of the National Security Council’s weakness as a unifying influence has been the open conflict between former Secretary of Defense Weinberger and Secretary of State Schultz over the “Weinberger Doctrine,” which specified a set of conditions required for US armed forces to be committed to combat.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, when the same two secretaries disapproved of arms dealings with Iran, the National Security Council staff felt compelled to step in and become an operational agency itself.

At a more routine level, the executor agencies continue to plan separately, operate independently, and submit separate budgets in an age when the Soviet opposition has most of the advantages. It is imprudent, to say the

least, to accept such inefficiencies when the Soviets enjoy, even in an age of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, a relative harmony among the actors of their trinity. True, under Mr. Gorbachev, national policy formulation has become more open and contentious. But when decisions are made, the Soviets manage to have all actors reading from the same script during execution. I am certainly no admirer of your communist enemies, but their national security strategy formulation process is indeed more calculated to harness unity of effort than yours.

To a military man like me, the National Security Council appears to be unworkable. On a routine basis, it calls for relatively junior members of your staff to obtain continuous consensus among cabinet members far senior to them and subordinate only to you. It is not unlike asking a captain to combine and coordinate the efforts of a flock of colonels. It can happen, but if it does, the captain is indeed exceptional and deserves to be a colonel himself.

The functional method by which your government is organized is wise only when planning and execution require little integration and coordination. Such a method places *you* in the position of integrator and coordinator of the functional departments and the instruments of national power they supervise and manage. Owing to your political preoccupations ensuing from the public concern with domestic issues, it would seem that the demands on you are extreme, to say the least. Although many have said that this system is effective, I maintain that when effective it has been due to extraordinary personalities and not due to any virtues of the organization. Thus, in sum, your defense executors in the modern version of my paradoxical trinity lack unified command in their application of the instruments of national power. Somehow, that unity must be achieved if you are to be successful as a nation.

This brings me to the part of my letter in which I am least comfortable—the solution. My experience in life gave me little familiarity with the institutions of a democracy, and that leads me to doubt in some measure my ideas for improving your ability to prevail in the strategic struggle. Therefore, I have tried to recommend only those measures that are similar to procedures, organizations, and systems that have already succeeded in the governance of your society. I have discarded at the outset any ideas of limiting the influence of the people over their government. Even if it were possible, it would be unwise in a democracy to set any precedent of reducing the power of the people. My recommendations are designed to achieve the following goals:

- Identification of and consensus on national interests;
- Consensus on the limits of national sacrifice for each interest;
- Long-range planning and resourcing to achieve the objectives necessary to protect those interests;
- Unified integration of all defense executors in both planning and execution of national strategy.

I would begin by establishing a biennial dialogue with your Congress and the people on what your interests are and what you are willing to sacrifice

to protect them. This seems to me no different from your budget process elevated to a higher plane. You should send your own recommendation to Congress with the request that it be accepted or modified, then passed as a law or joint resolution. Involve the people early. Use your access to the media to get the people interested and in touch with their representatives. Stress that their taxes will be spent and risks will be taken based on the guidance contained in the final legislative statement.

The major benefit of this process would be to extend the horizon of the national dialogue, thus breaking out of the short-term application which characterizes your policy. Once interests were spotlighted in this fashion, it would be much harder for Congress to delete one of them publicly from your submission. As a result, the electorate and the Congress would be forced to address long-term ramifications of short-term policies and actions. I believe the outcome would be a growth in your people's awareness and wisdom that would match their already expanded influence in policy.

I do not believe, however, that the executive branch, as now organized, is capable of leading this process from formulation, through planning, and into execution. Reorganization to some degree is necessary. In this regard, there are sufficient precedents in recent American history to identify a structural change which will work. These precedents involve establishment of the National Security Council, adoption of the overseas country-team concept, and the unification of the Department of Defense.

Although the National Security Council has enjoyed a mixed record so far as its effectiveness is concerned, Dr. Henry Kissinger's tenure as National Security Advisor demonstrates that the diverse executors of strategy can be made to act in reasonable concert if there is a strong, full-time unifier who enjoys the full confidence and support of the President.

Each administration appears to approach the National Security Council differently. Many views of the matter exist. President Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brezezinski, has said, "I think that the system would work best if . . . the practical coordination and the definition of the strategic direction would originate from [the President's] assistant for national security affairs, who would then tightly coordinate and control the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency as a team, with them knowing that he was doing so on the president's behalf."<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, Dr. Kissinger stated, "Though I did not think so at the time, I have become convinced a President should make the Secretary of State his principal adviser and use the National Security Adviser primarily as a senior administrator and coordinator to make certain that each significant point of view is heard. If the Security Adviser becomes active in the development and articulation of policy, he must inevitably diminish the Secretary of State and reduce his effectiveness."<sup>15</sup> What is consistent in the views of both men is their strong

desire for a *single dominant controller of strategic planning and execution below the presidential level*. I support this view with the soldier's ancient reverence for the principle of unity of command.

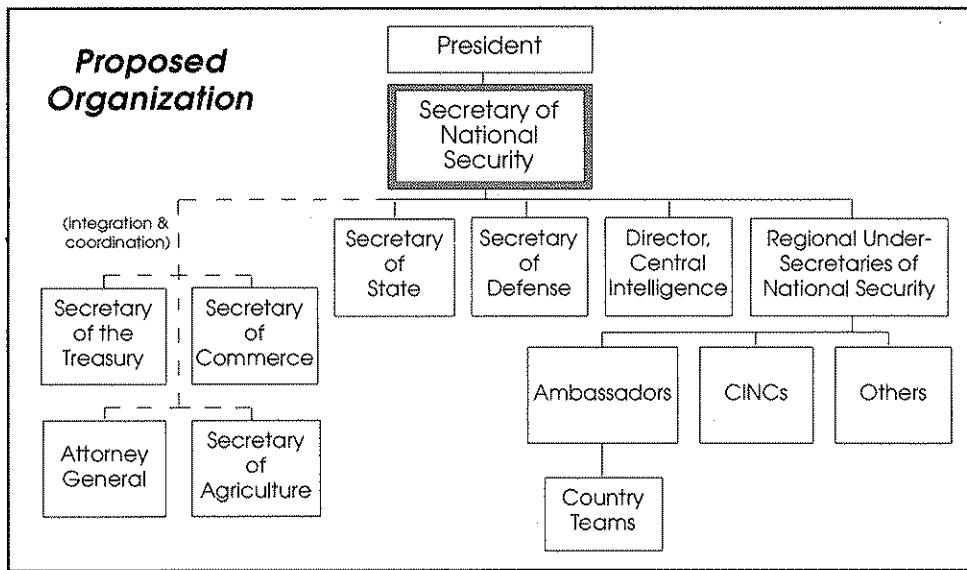
At the operational level, an equally successful precedent has been demonstrated by the country team, in which all the United States agencies within a foreign country are controlled and integrated by the ambassador. Here too, the efforts are orchestrated according to a single plan calculated to achieve national goals, not just the goals of a single agency.

These two working concepts suggest strongly that the answer to effective execution of national security strategy lies in organizational unification of the executor agencies. Fortunately, we know that this is a workable approach, because it has already succeeded for the last 40 years in the unification of the Department of Defense. Faced with a very similar problem of unifying the efforts of the armed services without requiring constant recourse to the President himself, Congress established a single cabinet post responsible for the military departments. I know that this solution is still maturing, but it works, and it has improved with every major evolutionary modification since 1947. It was strongly opposed by many at its inception, but today there are few who would advocate returning to independent service departments.

Following the lead of these three precedents, I propose the creation of a Department of National Security as a replacement for the National Security Council. It would assume direction of the Departments of State and Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency (including the remaining agency members of the intelligence community). The departments and agencies under the new department would maintain their current identities, affiliations, and functions, but their political chiefs would cease to be cabinet members, acquiring instead much the same status as the military service secretaries enjoy today. Additionally, the Department of National Security would coordinate the applicable efforts of all other cabinet departments whose initiatives are identified as having significant potential impacts upon national security and strategy.

For full effect, I recommend that the unification of effort be implemented in the "field" as well as in Washington. Since strategic plans will often require precise sequencing of efforts from the various executing agencies, the chain of authority should run from you as President to the Secretary of National Security to the regional undersecretaries and thence to the ambassadors and commanders-in-chief of the regional unified combatant commands. Where large military forces are not involved you will probably wish to retain the country-team organization under control of ambassadors reporting to the undersecretaries.

The commanders-in-chief of your unified commands would be under direct command of the Undersecretary of National Security for their region, but would continue to rely on the Department of Defense for support. The



Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff would become a principal advisor to you and the Secretary of National Security.

The Secretary of National Security and his staff must have a firm command of the full range of national strategic requirements and capabilities. The Secretary of National Security should be responsible for the following:

- Formulation of the draft national interest resolution for your submission to Congress biennially;
- Development of a short-, middle-, and long-term plan for achieving goals to protect declared interests;
- Administration of a unified process for strategic planning, programming, budgeting, acquisition, and operational planning;
- Preparation of an annual assessment of strategic success in achieving strategic goals to be included in your State of the Union Address;
- Command and control of all strategic action under your direction.

The reform I recommend will be difficult to implement. I ask you, however, as you ponder its benefits to look at it through the eyes of your nation's enemies. They will most certainly fear such a reform. They will be distressed by the promise of improved focus on long-term national interests among the American people and their government. They will see a counter to their own strategy directed at the creeping erosion of US interests. They will certainly be sobered by the prospect of unified planning and coordinated effort in the execution of American national security strategy. They will recognize that their opponent's national resources will be more efficiently used to frustrate their aims. At the same time, the image that you as Free World leader project to your allies will be clearer, more consistent, and better understood than ever before.

But the most important consequence of this reform may be in the restored concentration of your people on national values and national purpose. This process will force each American to assess the values and character of the nation. It will evoke discussion of national obligation to other peoples and to future generations. Most importantly it will provide a vehicle for acting on the conclusions. The end result will be the emergence of an increasingly responsible national character with sufficient long-term perspective to act and to make a difference.

I wish you well in the office you assume today, and I thank you for considering the ideas in this letter. If I may be of further assistance I am at your disposal.

I remain

Your Obedient Servant,  
*Carl von Clausewitz*

#### NOTES

1. Michael Howard, *Clausewitz* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), p. 66.
2. *National Security Strategy*, Hearings before Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, 100th Congress, January–February 1987, p. 3.
3. Representative Ike Skelton, "US Military Strategy Needs Focus," *Defense News*, 18 January 88, p. 24.
4. *National Security Strategy*, p. 2.
5. Jim McGee, "Naval Secretary Questioned US Persian Gulf Policies," *The Washington Post*, 6 September 1987, p. A 30.
6. Barry Rubin, *Secrets of State* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), p. 250.
7. John M. Collins, *US Defense Planning: A Critique* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1982), pp. 96–99. See especially Figure 12, "Collaboration between Secretaries of State and Defense." This excellent figure traces the relationship between all pairs of Defense and State Secretaries from 1947 to 1982, placing them along a spectrum from "partnership" to "open warfare."
8. Ronald Reagan, *National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington: GPO, January 1988), p. 7.
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10. Howard, p. 48.
11. Ibid., pp. 48–49.
12. Harrison Donnelly, *National Security Council*, Congressional Quarterly Editorial Research Report, January 1987, p. 23.
13. Phillip Taubman, "The Shultz-Weinberger Feud," *The New York Times Magazine*, 14 April 1985, p. 91.
14. Interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Washington Quarterly*, 5 (Winter 1982), 74.
15. Donnelly, p. 22.